

LEVERAGING HUMAN ASSETS: INTERPERSONAL SKILL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

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1. OBJECTIVE

As the requirements of U.S. Army missions fluctuate from conflicts to peacekeeping and nationbuilding efforts, Soldiers confront complex cultural situations and are often in delicate positions that could be politically explosive. Interpersonal performance can be a critical component of success in these situations. Interpersonal skills have been listed as one of the critical skills for future force Soldiers, and interpersonal performance is extremely important for success in special operations areas such as Civil Affairs (CA) or Special Forces (SF) that work closely with indigenous populations.

Despite the importance of interpersonal performance there is little emphasis on related skills in individual training or once the Soldier reaches the unit. In part this is likely due to the scarcity of tools available to provide training in this area. Creating tools for assessing, developing, and tracking interpersonal performance would be useful to counter this dearth. The goal of this project was to develop a DVD-based interpersonal skill training program that would facilitate performance in current missions. Civil Affairs (CA) was selected as the target population due to the importance of working with indigenous populations in the accomplishment of their mission. Two of this project's goals are to apply existing social cognition research to interpersonal skill development and provide accelerated, commander-controlled interpersonal skill training using automated tools that can be used anywhere in the world, whenever needed.

2. DESCRIPTION OF TRAINING CONTENT

During the first phase of this project we examined theories for understanding interpersonal functioning. We found that little of the extensive research on social cognition has been applied to understanding and enhancing interpersonal skills in the workplace. Literature in this area suggests that people's social behaviors are a function of their motivations, relevant knowledge, and

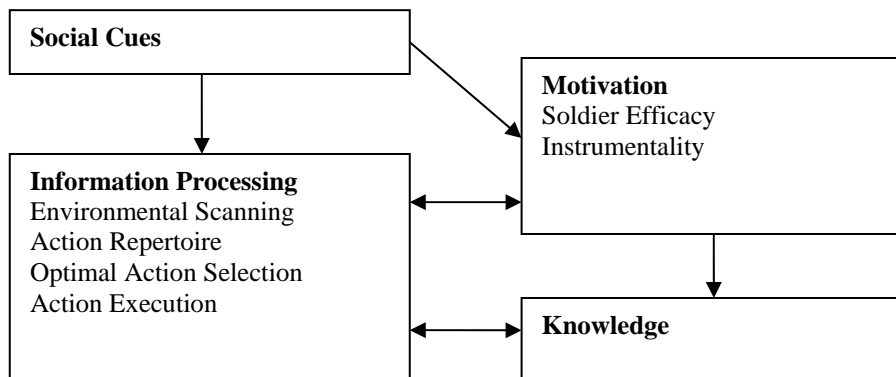
Table 1. Social Cognition Model

social cognitive processes (Strassberg, 2001). There are four key social cognitive processes – the encoding and interpretation of social information, behavioral goal formation, response generation and selection, and behavioral enactment (see Table 1). During interpersonal exchanges, people receive social cues from others and use those cues as inputs to the social cognitive processes that result in job performance behaviors. These behaviors, in turn, can serve as social cues, that stimulate the social cognition process in others. Each of these components--motivation, knowledge, and social cognition--represents an opportunity to understand and enhance interpersonal performance and provides a framework for designing training to structure the development of interpersonal skills. Following is a description of the course development and content, followed by a review of how specific exercises and content areas within the course may impact each element of the social cognition process.

First, the team took a more in depth look at CA job requirements and existing training in order to identify those interpersonal skill areas which are key to mission success, especially those not being trained with existing training. Based on this review, we identified three Critical Tasks for CA Soldiers with a heavy interpersonal skills requirement: Implement Use of Interpreters, Conduct Mediation, and Coordinate with Key Personnel. Examination of the written training material for these tasks helped researchers identify "how to" aspects of building rapport as a logical, basic skill area to develop a prototype training module.

The team completed draft learning objectives, outlines, and content for the building rapport module. Content was developed by drawing from three sources: the applied psychology literature; popular literatures on interpersonal skills; and CA soldier input and experiences. CA stories and scenarios have several purposes within the training: they are used as the basis for scripts for video, they provide individual testimonials, and they ensure that the language used in the training is consistent with CA soldier experiences.

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(Adapted from Strassberg, 2001)

In addition to choices made about the content, decisions were made about the technology used to deliver the training. One of the goals of the project is to develop training that can be used anywhere in the world without the restrictions imposed by classroom-based training. DVD provides a flexible platform for delivering training and thus we decided to create DVD-based training. Originally we planned to use an animation-based methodology to deliver training content. However, as the team began considering the training content two techniques emerged as key to effective training. The first is the use of experienced Soldiers to share effective interpersonal techniques acquired while deployed. The second is the use of actors to demonstrate nuances of facial expression and body language. Both of these techniques are better suited to the use of video and associated video production techniques, rather than animation. As a result, the team made the decision to pursue a video-based rather than animation-based approach to training to maximize training realism and the richness of the training content.

An additional methodology decision we made was whether to pursue a team or individually-based approach to training. Clearly when training interpersonal skills a team-based approach has the benefit of an environment with rich social stimuli. Participation of an entire team in training would likely increase the frequency and quality of social insight sharing within the team. However, because entire teams may not be able or willing to participate, we decided to design the training so that a trainee can complete the training on his or her own. The DVD includes guidance on how the individually-based training could be adapted to a group setting where appropriate.

The final course consists of an introduction and four modules: using non-verbal communication to build rapport, developing the mindset for rapport, managing your conversations to build rapport, and putting it all together – a case study in building rapport. A brief discussion of the content in each of these modules follows.

Introduction

The purpose of the introductory module is to help Soldiers understand the purpose of rapport building skills for mission success and to acquire an overview of the course. The introduction includes a video of Soldier interviews describing why building rapport is a key skill to success in CA, especially when the CA Soldier is deployed. It also includes specific information about the content of the entire course.

Module 1

The first module, using non-verbal communication to build rapport, contains sections on understanding the messages conveyed by body language, recognizing and demonstrating open body language, understanding and demonstrating matching body language, and understanding cultural norms regarding body language. The content is conveyed using Soldier testimonials, narrative lecture with visual summaries, and actor scenes depicting different aspects of body language.

Module 2

The second module, developing the mindset for rapport, helps Soldiers develop the perspective and thought processes that will allow them to build effective relationships. It contains sections on understanding the benefits of an open outlook, being aware of common

ground shared with others, understanding how others see and do things, and demonstrating respect for others. Content includes online exercises, Soldier testimonials, and narrative lecture with visual summaries.

Module 3

The third module, managing your conversations to build rapport, provides training in how to use conversations, especially initial first-contact conversations, to build rapport. It includes sections on using conversation starters to establish common ground, eliciting others perspectives, and using active listening skills. Similarly to the second module, this module also uses online exercises, Soldier testimonials, and narrative lecture with visual summaries, to convey the training content.

Module 4

The last section is a capstone exercise which provides an opportunity for trainees to integrate the material learned in the previous sections by preparing for and practicing an encounter. This module includes sections on developing objectives for an upcoming encounter, mentally walking through an upcoming encounter, and practicing the encounter. Soldier testimonials and online exercises are used to convey the module's content.

As discussed previously one of the goals of the project was to target the social cognitive processes with the training content. While the training is organized by skills (e.g. managing conversations) the content and exercises were created with the intent of enhancing social cognition. Following is a discussion of each element of the social cognition process and a discussion of how selected components of the training may enhance those components.

Environmental Scanning

During environmental scanning, individuals perceive environmental cues and store them in short term memory. Social perception is the ability to decode others' verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Examples of social cues include tone of voice, content of words, and nonverbal information. Social skill deficits may reflect poor skills in searching for relevant social cues. For example, according to Strassberg (2001), individuals with aggressive behavior patterns demonstrate the inability to search for relevant social cues. Further breakdown in the cue encoding process can occur because individuals misinterpret social cues or encode them incorrectly.

Several exercises may strengthen trainees' environmental scanning abilities. For example, in module one, using non-verbal communication to build rapport,

trainees watch videos where actors depict appropriate and inappropriate body language, which may help increase Soldiers' environmental scanning skills. In module two, trainees complete an online exercise in which they are asked to think about the other person's view in a hypothetical situation as well as variables that might affect his or her response to persuasion attempts. This exercise may enhance environmental scanning by providing practice in identifying appropriate situational variables when choosing an effective action.

Action Repertoire and Optimal Action Selection

After interpreting a social situation, individuals generate potential response options by drawing on their social knowledge (Strassburg, 2001). Social knowledge is what a person knows about interpersonal interactions including what behaviors are expected and accepted in various social situations. There are at least two types of social knowledge needed for generating effective responses: self-knowledge and procedural social knowledge. Both are potential causes of interpersonal skill deficits.

Optimal action selection refers to the choice of a behavior after potential response options have been generated. Self-awareness is likely critical to choosing an effective response. Self-awareness is the ability to use one's own experiences as a model to make inferences about the experience of others. It is the means by which individuals develop a variety of social strategies. Smith, Ford, & Kosloski (1997) describe a similar construct, called meta-cognition, as a necessary precursor to selecting an effective response to changing demands. Meta-cognition refers to the awareness and control of one's cognition including a control function of planning, monitoring, and regulating strategies or mental activities. The social environment is characterized by volatility, uncertainty, change, and ambiguity. Meta-cognitive skills may help individuals select strategies for adapting to changing social demands. Possession of meta-cognitive skill allows individuals to engage in mindful and deliberate learning, which in turn enables them to recognize novelty or change and select effective responses. The development of meta-cognitive skills is key to enhancing interpersonal performance.

Much of the training targets the enhancement and development of trainees social knowledge base and action selection skills. For example, in module one, trainees are taught about open and closed body language and its effects on others. Information about open and closed body language likely increases the Soldier's social knowledge base. In an exercise in module two, Soldiers

are asked to generate a list of things they hold in common with others with whom they may need to interact. Practice identifying areas of common ground likely also increases a Soldier's social knowledge base.

Action Execution

The final step in social cognition is action execution/response enactment. Enactment occurs when an individual executes a selected response. While clearly behavioral, enactment is a cognitive process as well. According to Strassberg (2001), response enactment relies on mental scripts and protocols called action schema. Action schemas are developed by observing and interacting with others and are potential targets for interpersonal skill development.

Several content areas in the training may enhance a Soldier's ability to execute the action he or she has selected including most of the fourth module capstone exercise. The capstone exercise requires Soldiers to prepare for and walk through a hypothetical encounter. Thinking through the encounter may enhance a Soldier's action schema and practicing the encounter may increase his or her skill in enacting the action.

Motivation

Motivation refers to the choice to expend effort, the choice of level of effort to expend, and the choice to persist in the expenditure of that level of effort (Campbell, McCloy, Oppler, & Sager, 1993). Expectancy theory provides a framework for considering the impact of motivation on interpersonal skills. Expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964) includes expectancy and instrumentality.

Expectancy is the belief that a particular act will be followed by a particular outcome (referred to as efficacy for the purposes of this paper). Instrumentality is the desirability of certain outcomes (valence) because of their utility for achieving other outcomes. Together these components create a force that motivates behavior.

The components of expectancy theory can be applied to understanding the motivation to use social skills. Individuals have expectancies about whether or not they will accomplish a goal if they expend effort. In the context of social skills, expectancies are the belief that the attempted application of social skills will result in socially skilled behavior. For example, individuals may perceive that they are better able to display social skill in one type of situation than another (e.g. giving a briefing versus counseling a subordinate) and thus have higher

social skill expectancy for that situation. Gist, Stevens, & Bavetta (1991) present evidence that social self-efficacy (a component of expectancy) is positively related to interpersonal performance. Efficacy can be developed and is a viable target for interpersonal skill training. Completion of the training course should increase a Soldier's efficacy for building rapport because they should then have, and be aware that they have, the basic skills for building a relationship.

Because social skill impacts goal attainment, instrumentality can also be placed in a social skill context. Individual differences in the value that individuals place on demonstrating social skill may exist, in part because some individuals may see a stronger linkage between the use of social skill and goal realization than others. The perception that socially skilled behavior leads to valued outcomes may encourage individuals to use their social environment to attain organizational goals. In combination with the expectancy that internal social skill will result in socially skilled behavior, instrumentality creates the motivation to use social skills. Like efficacy, instrumentality can be learned and therefore is important to consider in interpersonal skill development. Soldier testimonials throughout the training describe the importance of building rapport for successful completion of Civil Affairs missions, which should increase the value trainees place on the effective use of social skills, thus increasing overall motivation to use social skills.

3. EVALUATION

A multiple level evaluation is under development that would include an evaluation of trainee reactions, learning, and effects of the training on their performance on the job. Trainee reaction surveys are quick and inexpensive to administer, and can be used to improve aspects of the training program. A 35-question survey was designed to gather data on reactions to the course. Two categories of reactions are captured: affective reactions - the extent to which participants were satisfied with the program, and utility reactions - the extent to which participants feel that the training program will be of use to them on the job (Alliger et al, 1997). Students are asked to rate their level of agreement with each statement on a 1 to 5 scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The survey also includes five short-answer questions about the best and worst parts of the course, technical functioning of the WebDVD, improvements that could be made to the course, and additional content that should be included in the course. Preliminary comments suggest positive affective and utility reactions to the course.

In addition to capturing trainee reaction data, trainee learning will be evaluated with a pretest and posttest.

These will be designed to capture changes in trainee knowledge, skills, and motivation that can be attributed to the course. Finally, the effects of the training on students' performance of their job will be evaluated by collecting supervisor ratings of the Soldier's interpersonal performance before and after training, and comparing the ratings to those of Soldiers who did not complete the training.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this research project was to create and evaluate interpersonal skill training for Soldiers. A self-paced web-enabled DVD was created that develops knowledge and skills within the context of building rapport in Civil Affairs missions. For these missions, and any missions involving personal contact with local populations, the importance of increasing our assessment and training tools in the area of interpersonal performance cannot be overstated. While high technology weapons and Soldier protection systems are critical in areas such as combatting insurgents and preventing Improvised Explosive Device (IED) casualties, winning the hearts and minds of the local population can potentially provide an unparalleled level of success in these areas. Accomplishing this requires building rapport. Building rapport requires interpersonal and cultural knowledge and

skills. Cultural knowledge is critical, but in the absence of interpersonal skills and rapport it is of little practical value. From this perspective, the potential payoff for effective interpersonal skill training is substantial.

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